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SUBJECT: ISCI/BADR FEELING UNDER THREAT, RAISING INTER-SHIA TENSIONS

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Classified By: PMIN Robert Ford for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

I1. (S) The influential Shia Islamist party ISCI/Badr has become increasingly isolated among Shi'a parties in the past month, and its governing practices have become increasingly restrictive. Tensions have risen dramatically between ISCI/Badr and its fellow Shi'a Islamist coalition partner Da'wa over Prime Minister Maliki's promotion of tribal support councils and the alleged politicization of the Iraqi Army. ISCI/Badr is aware that it has suffered a drop in its already-low popularity as a result of its alliance with the Kurds during the late July clashes over Kirkuk in the parliament, and recognizes that it needs passage of an open-list election law to stabilize its support levels. Efforts to use inducements to attract support have been heavy-handed and apparently ineffective to date. Viewed by many as the face of incompetent governance and Iranian manipulation, the ISCI party and its Badr militia could become an object of inter-Shi'a violence, especially if the tribal support council initiative goes forward as planned or if elections are not held soon. End summary.

Uniquely Unpopular

I2. (S) Holding the Governor's office in four of nine southern provinces (Babil, Najaf, Diwaniyah, Dhi Qar) and a majority or governing plurality of the Provincial Council (PC) in six provinces (including Wasit and Muthanna), ISCI/Badr is the party most strongly associated by southern voters with strong-arm tactics and the failure to deliver key services. While recent polling indicates that its popularity levels are not significantly below Prime Minister Maliki's Da'wa or Ibrahim Ja'afari's National Reform Trend (ref A), most of the disenfranchised in the south -- tribal, secular, Shi'a and Sadrists -- show an especially intense disdain toward ISCI/Badr. As Jaysh-al-Mahdi (JAM) has weakened, in many places to the point of invisibility, and Da'wa takes an increasingly nationalist, militarized stance, many disenchanted Shi'a leaders see ISCI/Badr as the representative of Iranian-influenced authoritarianism in Iraq. In a September 18 iftar discussion, Ayatollah Hussein al-Sadr, arguably the most powerful Shi'a cleric in Baghdad, told us that "Badr is the new JAM." He also compared ISCI/Badr to the government of Saddam Hussein, and likened Ammar al-Hakim to Uday Hussein (reftel A).

Tribal Support Councils: Squeezed by Da'wa

¶ 13. (S) As provincial elections approach, ISCI/Badr is particularly worried about losing the support of tribal sheikhs, whose emphasis on Arab nationalism over religious identity elevates their political independence and increases their openness to new political partnerships. They are especially angry that Prime Minister Maliki, through the Iraqi Implementation and Follow-Up Committee for National Reconciliation (IFCNR), has aggressively recruited and funded tribal support councils throughout the South. Originally designed as an informal means for sheikhs to coordinate with the Iraqi Army and provincial governments on security concerns, tribal support councils are most developed in Wasit, Maysan, and Basra Provinces. New support councils were formed in Najaf, Babil, Karbala, Diwaniyah, and Dhi Qar provinces in early September, with additional units planned in the central and far southern provinces. With councils receiving a reported 25,000 USD from the Prime Minister's office to form, and a promised 800 USD per month to continue duties, ISCI/Badr has reason to be suspicious that support councils will be used to politicize the tribes in favor of Da'wa.

¶ 14. (C) ISCI/Badr has been particularly insistent that tribal support councils must not usurp the role of provincial councils. On August 31, the ISCI Governor in Babil Province, Salam Salih Mahdi al-Muslimawi, organized a Hillah conference attended by nine governors with the express goal of condemning Prime Ministry-backed tribal support councils and encouraging the governors to form their

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own tribal councils (ref E). On September 5 and again September 12, ISCI/Badr leader Jalal ad-Din as-Saghir used his sermon at Baghdad's Buratha mosque to make specific political arguments against the councils, condemning the proposal that support councils will have monitoring, protection, security, and coordination roles. He strongly defended the role of Provincial Councils and Governors vis-a-vis the support councils and also denied claims made by several sheikhs that the Shi'a religious leadership (*marja'iyyah*) have endorsed the initiative. On September 16, Jalal ad-Din called for new legislation to clarify the role of support councils.

¶ 15. (S) Third-party contacts suggest that PM Maliki and other Iraqi leaders developed tribal councils primarily for security reasons, but that the search for new political partnerships also played a part. In a September 8 meeting with poloff, Council of Representatives (COR) member and former Karbala Province Governor Sa'ad Safuk Sa'ud al-Masoudi said that he and his CoR Tribal Affairs committee -- mostly independents with no ISCI/Badr members -- coordinated with IFCNR to set up a series of recent conferences to encourage closer tribal coordination with the Iraqi Army. An Iraqqiya member and a tribal sheikh himself, al-Masoudi said that Maliki participated in these conferences with the intention of setting up tribal support councils. Al-Masoudi acknowledged the risk of these councils being exploited as a tool for the Da'wa party, but noted that a broad range of Sunni representatives from diverse parties as well as Shi'a independents have participated in these conferences. Among major southern parties, he added, only ISCI/Badr has refused to participate. Al-Masoudi agreed that councils required more precise legal definition to clarify their status in relation to the national and provincial governments.

An anti-ISCI Iraqi Army

¶ 16. (C) The security function of tribal support councils reinforces the growing feeling by ISCI/Badr that the Iraqi Army is lined up against them. On September 7, ISCI leader Ammar al-Hakim met with National Security Advisor Muwaffaq

al-Rubaie to complain about the politicization of the Iraqi Army. According to an ISCI press release, Ammar "urged (Rubaie) to have civilians occupy posts inside the military institution to avoid militarizing the society." Ammar particularly insisted that the National Operations Center -- which responds directly to the Prime Minister's office -- must be staffed almost exclusively by a nonpartisan civil service.

¶17. (S) In a September 10 meeting with poloff, ISCI CoR member Majid Khairallah Rahi al-Zamili expounded on his party's unease with the relationship between the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and government, saying "there is a growing division between the Iraqi Army and the Iraqi Police." (Note: The majority of police forces in the south have police chiefs with Badr links, whereas high-ranking Iraqi Army officials in the same region are consistently Shi'a nationalist, formerly Baathist, loyal to the central government, and anti-Badr. End comment.) Zamili, who represents Wasit Province, criticized the government's announcement that it would integrate Sons of Iraq (SOI) elements into the Iraqi security forces. He acknowledged, however, that the government needs an aggressive program to integrate SOI members into the economy. Zamili expressed concern about Rubaie's public campaign to integrate the majority of the SOI into the ISF or GOI ministries. He feared that many would end up as "terrorist cells in the Iraqi Police" and asked the U.S. to pressure the Maliki government to come up for a different solution for dealing with SOI integration. A September 14 PRT Wasit meeting with provincial ISCI party chief Ahmed al-Hakim reinforced these views (septel B).

Paranoid Governance

¶18. (S) In response to perceived threats to their authority, ISCI-led provincial governments have taken additional measures to restrict access and reduce civil liberties. In the latest of many examples from Babil Province, the ISCI-led Babil Provincial Council instituted a ban in late August on interaction with the PRT -- since lifted on September 4 -- due to concerns about an MNF-SC decision to release a Sunni detainee from the Northern part of the province (ref D). In Diwaniyah, Governor Khudari instituted new rules in August prohibiting any contact with Coalition Forces or PRT without his approval. Like his Babil counterpart, he has also taken recent steps to shut down media coverage of public events (ref F). Much of the change in Diwaniyah happened shortly after it moved to Provincial

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Iraqi Control (PIC), an ominous signal for projected PIC transfer this fall in Babil and Wasit provinces. (Note: As a general rule, ISCI governors and Provincial Council Chairman have roots in the leadership of Badr Corps; many have limited education. The ISCI governing team in Najaf Province has higher education levels and the PRT reports that the government has exhibited fewer heavy-handed tendencies. End note.)

¶19. (S) Reports of assassination attempts in the southern provinces have grown increasingly common in the past month, with the highest number in ISCI-run Babil and Dhi Qar provinces. Several were either orchestrated by or targeted toward ISCI/Badr leaders. In Dhi Qar, Iraqi Police announced on August 21 three separate Badr-associated attempts to assassinate the Provincial Chief of Police, General Sabah al-Fatlawi. ISCI governor Aziz Kadum Alwan al-Ogheli has long been an opponent of the police chief, a non-partisan with strong tribal roots. PRT Dhi Qar reports that Aziz was particularly angry at the police chief's decision earlier this year to shut down the ISF Tactical Support Unit, a haven for Badr Corps. Local media also implicated Governor Aziz in assassination plots against other key local figures in recent weeks, including the Mayor of

al-Batha and leading sheikhs of the al-Ghizi and Bidur tribes. On September 11, former Basra former police chief Jalil Khalaf al-Mozani noted to poloff that the Ministry of Interior (where he now works) is monitoring credible threats of Badr targeting several 'independent' police chiefs and high-ranking military officers throughout the country, specifically mentioning Dhi Qar, Babil, and Karbala. In recent meetings with Senior Advisor Gray, sheikhs from Muthanna have reported "death threats from Iran," which they believe would be carried out through Badr operatives.

¶10. (C) In provinces where ISCI/Badr is part of the governing structure but does not hold the governor's seat, ISCI performance within local government varies. In Maysan, the ISCI Deputy Governor appears to work in partnership with the ruling Sadrist coalition; no serious issues with ISCI governance are indicated (ref B). In Basra, ISCI and Badr operatives are troubled by the possible formation of a one-province Basra Regional Government. Their approach to the provincial government -- run by anti-Iranian Fadilah Governor Wa'eli -- is openly hostile in a manner not seen elsewhere in the south. (Note: ISCI continues to favor formation of a nine-province Southern Regional Government; the proposal has no visible support outside of ISCI itself. End note.)

Provincial Elections: The Kurdish Albatross

¶11. (C) ISCI/Badr representatives returned to CoR this week recognizing that their weaknesses have been exacerbated by the decision to vote with the Kurds on July 22 in opposition to the Provincial Elections Law. According to al-Masoudi (Iraqqiya CoR member from Karbala), most people in the south know that ISCI was the Shi'a party that supported the Kurds. Voters are angry, he continued, and think ISCI and the Kurds just want to use the Kirkuk issue to delay elections and stay in power. He added that ISCI CoR members aren't happy either. "Most of them want to vote against the Kurds but their bloc leader won't let them," Masoudi said. Multiple ISCI leaders throughout the south have expressed to poloffs and Senior Advisor Gray in recent weeks that they want the U.S. to pressure the Kurds to compromise on the Kirkuk issue and allow an election law to go forward. This appears to be both a function of genuine anger with the Kurds by provincial ISCI leaders and recognition of the need to be seen by voters as supportive of early elections and a unified Iraq.

In Favor of Open List?

¶12. (S) The wishes of the marja'iyah have also pushed ISCI/Badr to back open list provincial elections, though most observers believe ISCI members still privately prefer closed lists and would benefit from them. In a short September 10 conversation with poloff, ISCI CoR member Jenan Qasim al-Obeidi said that her party will support open list elections simply because the Shi'a religious hierarchy in her hometown of Najaf supports open lists. Jalal ad-Din Saghir said the same to PMIN on September 4. Other ISCI leaders make the argument that ISCI genuinely wants open list elections. Zamili told poloff that ISCI will support an open list -- whether as part of the 2008 law or as an amendment to the 2005 law -- not only because religious leaders want it, but because it can help ISCI expand coalitions on the provincial level. He expressed confidence that, in his home province of Wasit, ISCI has made many connections with technocrats and tribal leaders running on

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independent lists. (ISCI Party Chairman delivered a similar message to PRT Wasit in July; see ref G) While conceding that some voters in Wasit may not want to vote for ISCI/Badr, he argued that most voters want to be tied to ISCI in some manner, because Iraqis are "religious and pragmatic people."

ISCI Seeking Buyers

¶13. (S) While many PRTs report that ISCI/Badr has set up alliances with 'independent' provincial election candidates who are really ISCI/Badr members, the party has had little visible success recruiting new tribal, secular, and technocratic support. Expressing views representative of many tribal leaders who have met with PRTs, two sheikhs from Dhi Qar and Muthanna told Senior Advisor on September 2 that they have several times refused the offers of ISCI representatives offering them cash inducements, saying, "We will not support Iran." (ref C) Heavy-handed ISCI/Badr tactics can often create a backlash toward the party. In Diwaniyah earlier this year, Governor Khudari confiscated several million dollars of Coalition-purchased seed, fertilizer and equipment, and is holding them as a carrot to win support from rural tribal sheikhs. Early returns indicate that he has only succeeded thus far in raising the level of tribal resentment. A few scattered examples of recruiting success exist, such as an independent qadaa chairman in Mussayib who indicated to ePRT North Babil in late July that he would run as an ISCI member in upcoming elections. Meanwhile, the party continues to dig into its relatively deep pockets to sway the impressionable. As an anecdotal example, Babil University students reported to PRT Babil in early September that the Badr youth wing (Safwa Gathering) is arranging a contest for free student vacations to Erbil. It remains to be seen how much support can be bought.

Comment

¶14. (S) Dynamics in southern Iraq are increasingly working in a way that isolates ISCI/Badr as a convenient target for widespread frustration with poor government services, the excesses of religious parties, and Iranian manipulation. If provincial elections are not held soon, many will hold ISCI/Badr responsible, not only lowering their electoral popularity but also raising the potential for sporadic violence. Certain disaffected tribal sheikhs might be willing to confront ISCI by violent means, but do not have the financial wherewithal to sustain activity. ISCI's awareness of its isolated position, especially relative to Da'wa, increases the potential for inter-Shi'a conflict. A potential reconciliation deal between Prime Minister Maliki and Sadr/JAM elements, as reported in Iraqi media on September 14, may exacerbate the isolation. With many provincial Governors and police chiefs trained through Badr Corps, ISCI can be expected to follow its own historical pattern of acting aggressively when viewing itself under threat. The rising strength of PM Maliki and the direct challenge to provincial security and governance systems represented by the tribal support councils may pressure Badr such that increased inter-Shi'a violence by year's end becomes a real possibility. This wouldn't be the first time, of course. Southern Iraq saw occasional fighting and constant competition between ISCI/Badr elements and Jaysh al-Mahdi in 2004 - 2005. End comment.

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